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Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

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Human Figure Drawings by Children: A measure of sporting ability?

As early as the 1920's Psychologists have examined children's drawings, particularly of a human figure, and counted the number of body parts drawn against a prescribed list (e.g. head, eyes, arms) as a measure of the child's intellectual abilities. In later years, thanks to the work of Elizabeth Koppitz, Psychologists were not just counting the number of body parts but also considering the manner in which it was drawn e.g. an exaggerated size, shading or inclusion of non-body part items. This was taken as an indication of the child's feelings, fears, dislikes and anxieties.

In our earlier work the latter aspect of children's drawings was confirmed when it was found that children in a hospital school draw an exaggerated human figure of themselves (compared to the drawings of a figure of their best friend) when they are hospitalised for a serious illness.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14635240.2011.10708203>

In a follow up work we found that when children, as part of their treatment, had undergone dialysis, they did not draw their arms when asked to do a drawing of themselves.

<https://sheu.org.uk/sheux/EH/eh291kr.pdf>

In a recent work we extended human figure drawings as a measure of expression of feelings in the context of "war and conflict" by assessing Greek-Cypriot children's human figure drawings of themselves and that of a Turkish child.

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330912505_Images_of_the_other_The_Turks_in_Greek_cypriot_children's_drawings

We found that Greek-Cypriot children drew themselves significantly taller than a Turkish child. This was further confirmation of Koppitz's criteria that children draw figures that they like taller than those that they dislike. Furthermore, the Turkish figure drawn had a darker skin in the format of more shading, mostly a male looking person and often included items such as a weapon to the human figure drawings. This finding was taken as how human figures drawn could be a reflection of a child's feelings towards "others" in ethnically divided societies.

There has, however, been little or no research on the extent to which children's human figure drawings could be a measure of their future sporting activities and talents. Our work in 2017 has provided a promising view that this could be a new exciting avenue. In our study we asked 196 children from 3 countries (British, Iranian and Brazilian) to draw a human figure of a football player. The most striking aspect of the study was that a large proportion of Brazilian child drew a football player portraying a realistic football action e.g. kicking the ball, compared to other children studied.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5590530/>

Furthermore, we observed that British children were more concerned with shading the football player compared to children in Iran and Brazil. This was taken as British children being more attentive to a player's ethnicity. Overall we consider the findings to be an indication of how a child's depiction of a footballing figure is a reflection of their interest and perhaps as their future manifestation of their talent in playing football. Thus we have argued that it may be the case that children who portrayed more action rather than a static picture of a football player may also demonstrate greater skills in playing football. One way to examine this is to have objective measures of the child's footballing ability (as recorded by expert football coaches) and examine the human figure drawings against the manner in which the football player is drawn. If a relationship is found between the degree of objective measures and the presence of realistic action, attention to details and even the emotions expressed in the drawings, this may open up a host of interesting dimensions for assessment of children's human figure drawings as a tool for predicting future sporting talent. This could not only be in football, but could also extend the same paradigm to other sports.